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# LORD NORTHCLIFFE AND THE WAR

BY SYDNEY BROOKS

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LORD NORTHCLIFFE has been a power in British journalism for now nearly twenty years. It was on May 4, 1896, that the first issue of the *Daily Mail* was sold in the streets of London. Its advent marked a revolution in the press not merely of the metropolis but of the whole kingdom. Up till then a certain ponderosity had been the hall-mark of most British newspapers. They were extremely respectable, weighty and dull. They had, one might have said, a temperamental distrust of liveliness as something dangerous and ensnaring. Verbatim reports of everything reportable, long-winded and eminently sententious editorials, and stodgy columns of Parliamentary debates, filled their pages. Occasionally some journal of unusual enterprise would send a special correspondent out to Persia or Afghanistan, would dive deeply into the profundities of European politics, would open a subscription-list for some semi-public object, or produce a new scheme of army reform. It was a decent Press and a well-informed Press. It was wealthy, pontifical, respected and "literary." But it had an extraordinarily limited range. From the every day interests of normal men and women it stood serenely apart. It made no effort to reach the mass of the people who had grown to maturity since the setting up of a national system of education. It was curiously out of touch with the commercial life of the country. There were, of course, some exceptions. The *Pall Mall Gazette*, under Mr. Henry Cust, was a brilliant feature of the early 'nineties. So too was the *Daily News*, when Mr. E. T. Cook was its editor and Mr. Andrew Lang, Mr. Justin McCarthy and Mr. H. W. Paul were among its contributors. In general the appeal of the British Press in those days was mainly to the educated and the fastidious, to

those who liked to find a University flavor in the editorial columns of their favorite paper, and who were much less interested in news than in opinions.

Into this easy-going and self-satisfied world there burst nineteen years ago the *Daily Mail*. Mr. Alfred Harmsworth, as he then was, its originator and chief proprietor, had already shown as a producer of newspapers that he had ideas, keenness, courage and initiative. But this was by far the biggest venture he had yet essayed. Over \$2,500,000 was spent on the initial cost of founding the *Daily Mail*; two solid years were devoted to the preparatory work; and the paper was issued daily, complete in every respect, for nearly three months before a single copy was sold to the public. Its success was immediate. Small where its rivals were unwieldy, compact where they were diffuse, published at one cent while they sold for two, sacrificing everything to presenting the events of the previous twenty-four hours in as clear and as concise a form as possible, and with a news service far beyond anything that had hitherto been even attempted, it jumped instantly into popular favor. The daily circulation at the end of the first year was over 300,000, and at the end of two and a half years had passed 500,000; during the Boer War it reached the 1,000,000 mark, and is now, I suppose, somewhere between 1,300,000 and 1,400,000. From the first it has been a paper with a real individuality, going clean outside the humdrum game of politics, tackling the questions that interest it with a directness the very opposite of the gingerly, non-committal fashion affected by most papers, suggesting rather than echoing or criticising, and never content to hew to the hackneyed line. From the first, too, it developed a remarkable knack of getting the news ahead of its competitors. Those exclusive pieces of information that warm the editorial cockles have repeatedly refreshed the columns of the *Daily Mail*. It made a particular hit with its war service during the struggle with the Boers and the Russo-Japanese War; and its intelligence in matters of domestic moment has again and again been in advance of all other London journals. Two features in especial helped it to build up a circulation never before dreamed of in the history of the British daily Press. One was a business organization that was never satisfied with what was good so long as it saw a chance of getting something better. The *Daily Mail* became a national newspaper to a unique degree

and in a way all its own. A duplicate plant was set up in Manchester and connected with London by a group of special wires. The paper is telegraphed each night to Manchester, printed in facsimile, save for a certain amount of local news, and is distributed from there throughout the North of England in time for breakfast. Another edition is similarly telegraphed to Paris whence it covers practically the whole Continent; and yet a third edition has within the last two or three years been brought out on the Riviera. The *Daily Mail* has, in short, solved the problem of distribution in a way that enables it to be on sale in all the principal towns of the United Kingdom almost as soon as any of the local papers; while on the Continent no British journal even begins to compete with it.

The other feature that did a great deal to establish its position was the Fourth Page. The Fourth Page of the *Daily Mail* is given up to a column or two of editorials, followed by two or three columns of special articles, each about twelve hundred words long. Most of the ablest writers of the day have at one time or another contributed to these columns. It was in them that the late Mr. G. W. Steevens first made a national and an international name for himself as the most brilliant war correspondent and descriptive writer of our generation, the one man who with the highest literary gifts and the culture and temperament of a scholar was yet an unsurpassable journalist. For sheer breadth of interest I know of nothing in the British or American Press that even begins to approach these Fourth Page articles in the *Daily Mail*. They cover every topic in which normal men and women are interested and they have sustained from the first an astonishingly high standard of style, authority and distinction. Perhaps, indeed, the greatest achievement of the *Daily Mail* has been precisely this enlargement of the scope of things with which journalism should concern itself. It has lent its support to a bewildering variety of causes, for each of which it has campaigned with consummate effectiveness. It was the first journal to perceive that the motor-car was not merely a new toy or a new convenience but portended a complete revolution in the methods of land transportation. The publicity and encouragement it gave to the industry did much to stimulate British manufacturers to catch up with their French rivals. It was the first journal, too, to foresee the possibilities of aviation. By offering in

all some \$200,000 in cash as prizes for flying it has done more than any other single agency not merely to popularize the sport but to equip the Army and Navy with what the present war has proved to be an indispensable weapon. In one year the *Daily Mail* headed a movement in favor of earlier holidays—against, that is to say, the tradition which confined the summer vacation to the month of August. In another it turned its attention to the question of small holdings, and took a farm, stocked and equipped it, selected a tenant, and interested the whole country in the success of the experiment. In a third it initiated a vigorous effort, backed up by prizes of over \$3,000 in value, to secure for the British public a properly standardized loaf containing at least 80 per cent. of the whole wheat. The result of its agitation, which aroused immense interest throughout the kingdom, was a distinct and permanent improvement in the bread of the nation. In a fifth year the *Daily Mail* offered \$5,000 for the finest bunch of sweet peas, in the sixth another \$5,000 for vegetable growers and in a seventh a further large sum of money for a new rose—three competitions that at once thrived on and ministered to the national love of gardening. And at other times the *Daily Mail* has fought for pure milk, has given large prizes for the best designs of cottages and small houses, and has paid away several thousands of pounds in fulfilment of a scheme of insurance for its readers against accidents in public vehicles, and has utilized its financial columns as a medium for effecting the purchase and sale of stocks and shares.

All these campaigns, it will be noticed, were directed to far-sighted ends, and the health and happiness of the nation. In addition the *Daily Mail* has shown an unequalled ability for raising money. During the Boer War it collected in three months over \$500,000 to supply the British troops with comforts. In four days its readers furnished some \$80,000 to enable the Union Jack Club for soldiers and sailors to be opened free of debt. When Lord Rosebery brought to the notice of the *Daily Mail* readers the plight of the London cabbies, deprived of their livelihood by the advent of the taxi-cab, nearly \$40,000 was raised in a few days, some five hundred cabbies were trained as motor drivers, over a thousand families were given substantial relief, and a number of pensions were distributed. A single article in the *Daily Mail* describing the needs of the children in an

East End district brought in at once unsolicited contributions of over \$10,000, and a Santa Claus fund some ten or eleven years ago furnished sixty thousand children, who otherwise would have gone without, with Christmas stockings. Another and more appealing act of practical benevolence was the publication of a weekly edition of the *Daily Mail* in Braille type for the blind. It was thoroughly in accordance with its traditions that the *Daily Mail* should have subscribed for \$125,000 of the new War Loan.

These various enterprises and achievements give the measure of the *Daily Mail* as the most popular and practical of all British newspapers. None other enters so intimately into the daily domestic life of the nation. It has left its mark, too, on many issues of political moment. It has advocated a national system of military service; it has fought with power and effect for a larger navy; and it has had from the beginning a very clear idea of the character and intentions of German policy and of the menace to British security embodied in it. But though it has a great social influence, its political influence is scarcely as great as its enormous circulation would suggest. It affects elections rather than political thought. Had it been guided by an instinct of statesmanship as sound and sagacious as its business and its journalistic instinct, it would have scaled an almost unimaginable height of authority. As it is, people are as a rule more interested what the *Daily Mail* does than in what it thinks. On the other hand I do not think that the charge of "sensationalism," often brought against it, is well-founded. It has made mistakes like all other papers; but I have seen enough of its inside workings to be sure that no journal could be at more pains to ascertain the facts. Its methods of handling them and the views it builds upon them may at times be impeached, but the accuracy as well as the fullness of its information and the care and ability with which its news columns are edited are in general beyond successful attack. In many ways the *Daily Mail* has improved the standards of British journalism, notably by having nothing to do with the accounts of executions that used to be horribly common in the 'nineties and by keeping its reports of divorce cases and other unsavory scandals within limits; while its influence on the appearance, make-up, and general alertness of its competitors, on the price at which they are sold, and on the salaries paid in all ranks of the profession

has been prodigious and altogether to the good. What used to be a competition among writers to contribute to papers has been largely converted into a competition among papers to secure the services of writers.

Besides the *Daily Mail* Lord Northcliffe is also the chief proprietor of *The Times*, which he secured control of some eight or nine years ago, and the *Evening News*, which came into his possession about a couple of years before the *Daily Mail* was started. The *Evening News* is an exceedingly brisk, well-arranged and readable paper that in point of circulation far outdistances any of its metropolitan rivals in evening journalism. *The Times*, under Lord Northcliffe's auspices, has been reduced successively from six cents to four, and from four to two. It is the cheap and easy thing to say that the reduction in price has been more than offset by a reduction in tone and quality. I disagree entirely. *The Times* is still easily the most authoritative journal not only in England but in the world, and the dominant organ of the educated classes. Its unrivalled foreign service, the excellence of its special articles from all countries and on all political and social subjects, and its impartiality in throwing open its correspondence columns to arguments on all sides of every public question, made it and still keep it a national forum. So far from having parted with any of its old and honorable traditions *The Times* of to-day, better managed and more prosperous than in any period of its history, has on the contrary maintained and amplified them. The suspicion that Lord Northcliffe's association with it would involve some falling-off in dignity or judgment is one that any issue of the paper is enough to refute. With increased energy and resources and a remarkable improvement in the technique of newspaper production and presentation, *The Times* combines all its old intelligence, its knowledge of political events at home and abroad, its independence and its measured sanity. As a national journal it remains without a peer; it speaks for England as no other paper even pretends to. In addition Lord Northcliffe owns a Sunday newspaper and a number of minor periodicals which for my present purpose may be left out of account. When people speak of "The Northcliffe Press" they mean *The Times*, the *Daily Mail* and the *Evening News*.

To many Englishmen Lord Northcliffe, as the director-in-chief of these three powerful journals, seems a sinister

figure. Yet it would be easy, I imagine, to over-estimate the extent to which he actually lays down the policies of his newspapers. He is believed to write himself many of the editorials in the *Daily Mail*, but I have never heard of his writing a single one for *The Times* or the *Evening News*. The three papers pursue, it is true, though in very different ways, the same general lines, but this probably arises from a natural approximation of attitude and opinion rather than from a central inspiration. One often, too, hears it said that Lord Northcliffe cares only for circulations and success and that he will champion any cause and exploit any momentary passion if only by so doing he can sell more papers. That is a ludicrous untruth. Lord Northcliffe is an extremely practical journalist who understands all sides of the business, is proud, and naturally so, of the unexampled triumphs he has achieved in his chosen profession, and possesses a highly developed instinct for catching the popular favor. But he is also a man of genuine public spirit and patriotism. He has travelled much and with an understanding eye and mind; he is one of the comparatively few Englishmen who really know America and can enter into the American point of view; he is one of the largest employers of labor in the kingdom and one of the largest manufacturers of paper in the world. All this, and a zest in life that brings him into agreeable relations with multitudes of people, make him a man who would count in any sphere. He enjoys life and he enjoys power and he enjoys particularly turning out a better newspaper than anyone else; but for money itself he has, I should say, the indifference that most men feel who have made a sufficient fortune in their early years by sheer hard work and to whom it is simply an instrument for further activities. Lord Northcliffe is a prodigious and insatiable worker, a man of swift and strong emotions, of instantaneous, usually shrewd, sometimes erratic and impulsive decisions, kindly and generous in his periodical relations with men, tingling with ideas himself and quick to appreciate them in others, with an ever-present sense of humor that can generally be appealed to when his self-confidence shows signs of passing into rashness or obstinacy, an expert fisherman and therefore a man who knows how to wait, and a joyous and wholly delightful companion on the golf-links. He is in every sense a man of power, but it is power directed to no personal or unworthy ends. So



far from merely giving the public what it wants he more often makes it want the many excellent things he has to give; and if he were once convinced that the national interest demanded that a certain thing should be done, Lord Northcliffe would do it and would keep on doing it, whatever the loss of popularity or circulation or advertisements.

Of this he has just given startling and sufficient proof. Even during the present war the British people have had few severer shocks than awaited them when they picked up the *Daily Mail* of May 21, and read the editorial article on "The Tragedy of the Shells: Lord Kitchener's Grave Error". In that article the *Daily Mail* bluntly declared that "Lord Kitchener has starved the Army in France of high explosive shells" and that in spite of repeated warnings he had persisted in sending out shrapnel when what was needed was shells that "would dynamite their way through the German trenches and entanglements and enable our men to advance in safety". The kind of shell supplied to the British soldiers by Lord Kitchener's orders "has caused", it was said, "the death of thousands of them". As a gatherer of men Lord Kitchener had done admirably, though the *Daily Mail* refused to print any further War Office advertisements urging the enlistment of men of forty—most of whom would be married—while "some thousands of capable young slackers were staying at home and stealing the business of married men who have gone to the front". Such a state of affairs it declared, was "no testimony to Lord Kitchener's organizing ability." It was particularly severe on the suggestion, at that time not an uncommon one, that Lord Kitchener might succeed Sir John French as commander-in-chief of the British forces in France. "It has never been pretended", said the *Daily Mail*, "that Lord Kitchener is a soldier in the sense that Sir John French is a soldier. His record in the South African War as a fighting general—apart from his excellent organizing work as Chief of the Staff—was not brilliant. The opinion which Lord Roberts expressed as to his handling of troops at Paardeberg is well known, and we have never met a soldier who held any other opinion. Nothing in Lord Kitchener's experience suggests that he has the qualifications required for conducting a European campaign in the field, and we can only hope that no such misfortune will befall this nation as that he should be permitted to interfere with the actual

strategy of this gigantic war.—If by any mischance Lord Kitchener went to France to conduct the campaign, we should probably have a costly object lesson in the difference between African and European warfare.”

On the following day and for many days after the *Daily Mail* reiterated its charge that Lord Kitchener had supplied the Army with the wrong kind of shells. It saddled him with the direct responsibility. It insisted that a “tragic blunder” had been committed and that the public ought to know the facts. It declared it to be a proof of “grave negligence” that the shortage of high explosive shells should persist “after ten months of incessant object-lessons.” It very much doubted “whether there is a single Front Bench man on either side of the House who is prepared to join the Coalition Ministry except on the express condition that Lord Kitchener no longer holds the absolute power which has placed the Army in its present predicament.” It declared it to be a matter of immediate necessity that “the industrial business of organizing the production of munitions” should be separated “from the military business of raising and training troops.” “There is something wrong with the war,” it exclaimed, “and the public ought to know it.” It answered its critics with the confident retort, first, that the *Daily Mail* stood by every word it had written on the vital need of high-explosive shells, and secondly, that when the facts emerged, as emerge they would, all of its statements would be found to be more than justified. Personally I had no doubt that the *Daily Mail* would be proved right. Lord Northcliffe had paid, to my own knowledge, at least two visits to the front and has probably seen more of the inside of the war than any other British civilian. His sources of information are innumerable, and it seemed extremely unlikely that on a matter of such moment he could possibly have gone astray. Nor in fact had he. On the main and essential point he has been justified up to the hilt. I have, it is true, heard that there is another side to the shell question, that the Headquarters Staff at the front were late in realizing the need for high-explosive shells, that Lord Kitchener more than once asked them to look into the matter, and that they astonished and overwhelmed him by suddenly demanding that of the shells sent out, 70 per cent. should be high-explosive. According to this version Lord Kitchener was to blame only for the delay that followed in meeting

Sir John French's tardy requisitions. But however this may be, the fact that the Army was short of munitions was abundantly proved and to Lord Northcliffe must go the credit for hammering it into the public mind.

Where, however, he erred, or seemed to err, was in attacking Lord Kitchener personally. That there was any personal feeling of any kind behind the attack I do not for one moment believe—the two men have not, indeed, met for several years—but it was a mistake in tactics that the public bitterly resented—the whole country was instantly in an uproar; the *Daily Mail* was publicly burned by excited crowds and banned by one public library after another; letters of abuse, I am told, poured into the office; all the rival newspapers began belaboring Lord Northcliffe with one accord; and undoubtedly public opinion was moved to a greater indignation by the references to Lord Kitchener than it was by the revelations that he had muddled the provision of shells. Lord Northcliffe, if he were challenged on the point, would probably reply that to make his disclosures effective and to rouse the nation to their meaning and gravity it was necessary to pin the responsibility where it unquestionably belonged; that the crisis was too serious merely to throw the blame for it on the "War Office" or "the authorities" or some other vague and impersonal abstraction, or to spare any man's feelings or reputation; and that, in addition, he considered the possibility of Lord Kitchener's being sent to the front as full of peril and took the most direct means of saying so and of killing the project. He might also reply that everything he said in regard to shells is now admitted to be true; that the public ignorance which veiled the facts and was the main obstacle to their removal is at an end; that, just as he suggested, the business of furnishing munitions has been taken out of Lord Kitchener's hands; and that the energy and determination with which the country is now throwing itself into the task of making good its deficiencies in armaments are largely the result of his revelations and could not have been produced by any other means. I still think, however, that these results could have been obtained without attacking Lord Kitchener or raking up his tactical dispositions at Paardeberg, or irritating the public by casting slurs on the capacities of a man in whom it reposes a just confidence. *The Times*, which powerfully ventilated the question of the shells, contrived to do so without

suggesting any private animus or indulging in irrelevant personalities. Had the *Daily Mail* restricted its outspokenness to the matter immediately at issue, it would have scored an undiluted triumph. As it is, great numbers of people are left under a confused impression that it has somehow acted unfairly and unpatriotically; much of the effect it aimed at has been blunted or dissipated; and its reputation and influence have suffered for the time being and until the inevitable reaction sets in.

Nothing, however, can disguise the fact that Lord Northcliffe was the first man with knowledge and courage enough to lay bare the shortage of shells and machine guns, which, so long as it lasts, must pile up the casualty lists and operate as a fatal barrier to any sustained advance. Nobody, again, who knows him can doubt that in acting as he did, he was impelled solely by public motives. Nor, I think, can anyone question that the net result has been highly advantageous to everybody except Lord Northcliffe, that the country at last realizes the truth which official assurances had obscured or perverted, and that it was only by painting the situation in its real colors that the British people could be stirred to the gigantic efforts necessary to retrieve it. It was the question of the shells far more than anything else that brought down the Liberal Government and led to the Coalition Ministry, the division in the powers of the War Office, and the appointment of Mr. Lloyd George as Minister of Munitions. These developments may have been discussed and meditated even before Lord Northcliffe started on his campaign. But his journals, and his alone, made them inevitable; and it is merely a question of time before the value of the national service that they thus rendered is ungrudgingly recognized.

For all editors and newspaper proprietors the war has necessarily been a time of peculiar difficulties and anxiety. The censorship controls their news columns, but it does not control their editorial policy. To know when the interests of the country called for silence and when for plain speaking; to weigh the public gain that might be hoped for from criticising the speeches or actions of Ministers against the risk that thereby the national unity might be impaired; to decide how far particular measures or policies should be advocated and how far it would be better to leave the initiative solely in the hands of the Government—all these problems,

occurring and recurring in a hundred different forms, have asked for their solution an extraordinary degree of balance and discrimination. The papers under Lord Northcliffe's control have borne the test well. They have never underestimated the enemy or lent any countenance to the ludicrous notion that this war will be either a short or an easy one. They have consistently striven against official optimism or reticence or timidity to induce the nation to face the facts. On many questions—the internment of aliens, for instance, the drink problem, the best way of handling the labor difficulty, the need of national service, and the supply of shells—their suggestions and their insight have been proved by the event to be superior to the Government's. Their criticisms have in the main been constructive and directed solely to the more efficient prosecution of the war; and their timely disclosures of deficiencies that grew the more dangerous and the harder to remedy the longer they remained unrealized or only hinted at or surrounded with mystery, may prove to have saved the country from a great disaster.

SYDNEY BROOKS.